# The Canonization of the Bible

## Defining Canonization

The term *canonization* refers to the process by which certain writings were recognized as divinely inspired and authoritative for faith and practice. The word *canon* itself is derived from the Greek word *kanōn* (κανών), meaning "rule" or "measuring stick," signifying a standard by which something is judged or accepted. In the context of the Bible, canonization describes the historical and theological process through which Jewish and Christian communities discerned which books were to be regarded as sacred Scripture.

Canonization was not an instantaneous or arbitrarily decreed event but rather a gradual recognition of specific texts as divinely inspired. This process involved religious leaders, early church fathers, councils, and communities who preserved, copied, and referenced these writings over centuries. The biblical canon, as it stands today, consists of two major sections:

1. The **Old Testament**, derived primarily from the Hebrew Scriptures, with some variations among Jewish, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions.
2. The **New Testament**, composed of 27 books written in the first century AD, widely accepted across Christian traditions.

## Context of Canonization

The canonization of the Bible took place within a broader historical and religious context. The Old Testament originated within the Jewish faith, deeply rooted in the covenantal history of Israel, while the New Testament emerged within the early Christian movement, which viewed Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises.

For the Jewish people, the process of canonization likely began during the Babylonian exile (6th century BC) and solidified by the late 1st century AD. The early Christians inherited the Jewish Scriptures (what they called the "Law and the Prophets") and later developed a body of writings that came to be known as the New Testament. These writings, composed between approximately 50–100 AD, included accounts of Jesus' life (Gospels), letters of instruction (Epistles), historical records (Acts), and prophetic revelation (Revelation).

The early Church functioned in a world of competing religious movements, philosophical thought, and political opposition. Various writings circulated within Christian communities, some of which were widely recognized as authoritative while others were disputed. Over time, the Church sought to clarify which writings truly carried apostolic authority and divine inspiration, especially in response to emerging heresies and alternative theological claims. The formal recognition of the New Testament canon, though largely established by the 2nd and 3rd centuries, was explicitly affirmed in the 4th century through councils and church leaders.

### Scope of This Study

This study traces the canonization of the Bible from the time of Jesus and the apostles (1st century AD) through the key events, discussions, and councils that led to the establishment of the biblical canon. It will cover:

1. The **Old Testament Canon** – its Jewish origins, variations in different traditions, and its acceptance by early Christians.
2. The **New Testament Canon** – how early Christian writings were collected, recognized, and affirmed as Scripture.
3. The **Development of the Canon** – key figures, heresies, and councils that played a role in shaping the biblical canon.
4. The **Finalization of the Canon** – how the canon was affirmed in the 4th century and later theological debates, including the impact of the Protestant Reformation.

# II. The Old Testament Canon

## 1. Hebrew Scriptures (Jewish Canon) Before 1 AD

By the time of Jesus (1st century AD), the Jewish Scriptures were widely recognized in three primary divisions:

1. **Torah (Law)** – The five books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy).
2. **Nevi'im (Prophets)** – The historical and prophetic books (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets).
3. **Ketuvim (Writings)** – A collection of poetic and wisdom literature (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles).

Although these divisions were commonly recognized, the exact list of books was not universally fixed in all Jewish communities by the 1st century AD.

#### Variations Among Jewish Groups

Different Jewish sects had differing perspectives on the canon:

- **Pharisees** – Held to a broader canon that later closely resembled the Masoretic Text of Judaism (which became the basis for the Protestant Old Testament). They accepted the full Torah, Prophets, and Writings.
- **Sadducees** – Recognized only the Torah (first five books of Moses) as authoritative. They rejected the Prophets and Writings, which is why they denied doctrines such as resurrection, which are taught in later books like Daniel.

- **Essenes** – A sect associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls, they had their own preferred collection of texts, which included apocalyptic writings such as the *Book of Enoch* and *Jubilees*.
- **Hellenistic Jews (Diaspora Jews)** – Those living outside of Israel, especially in Greek-speaking regions, often used the **Septuagint**, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that contained additional writings (later called the "Deuterocanonical books" by Catholics and the "Apocrypha" by Protestants).

Despite these variations, there was broad agreement that the **Torah** and the major **Prophets** were divinely inspired and authoritative. The status of some of the Writings, however, remained debated, particularly books like Ecclesiastes, Esther, and Daniel.

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## 2. Influence of the Septuagint

### The Translation of the Septuagint (LXX)

The **Septuagint (LXX)** was a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures produced between the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC in Alexandria, Egypt. It was originally created for Jewish communities living in the Greek-speaking world who no longer spoke Hebrew fluently. According to tradition, 72 Jewish scholars translated the Torah into Greek under the patronage of King Ptolemy II (c. 250 BC), and later, the rest of the Old Testament books were translated.

### Contents of the Septuagint

- The **Septuagint included all the books of the Hebrew Bible**, but with some variations in wording and order.
- It also **contained additional writings** not found in the Hebrew Masoretic Text. These books include Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Baruch, 1 & 2 Maccabees, and additional sections of Esther and Daniel.
- These additional writings became what is known as the **Deuterocanonical books** in the Catholic tradition and the **Apocrypha** in Protestant traditions.

### Use of the Septuagint by Greek-Speaking Jews and Early Christians

- Many **Hellenistic Jews** (Jews in the Greek-speaking diaspora) considered the Septuagint as their primary Scripture.
- The **early Christian Church**, which rapidly expanded into Greek-speaking regions, **frequently quoted from the Septuagint** rather than the Hebrew text.
- The **New Testament authors** often referenced the Old Testament in Greek, aligning with the wording of the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew Masoretic Text.

Examples:

- **Matthew 1:23** quotes Isaiah 7:14 as, "The virgin shall conceive and bear a son," which follows the Septuagint wording, whereas the Hebrew text refers more generally to a "young woman."
- **Hebrews 1:6** references Deuteronomy 32:43, but the quoted phrase appears only in the Septuagint, not in the Masoretic Text.

As Christianity spread among non-Jewish communities, the Septuagint became the dominant version of the Old Testament among early Christians. However, this reliance on the Septuagint would later lead to disagreements between Jewish and Christian communities over which texts were authoritative.

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## 3. Early Christian Adoption of the Old Testament

### The First Christians and the Hebrew Scriptures

The earliest Christians, being primarily Jewish, **accepted the Hebrew Scriptures as divinely inspired**. Jesus Himself referenced the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:44), affirming the threefold division of the Hebrew Scriptures. The apostles frequently cited the Old Testament in their teachings, showing its continued authority in Christian faith.

### Disputes Over the Canon as Christianity Expanded

As Christianity spread beyond Jewish communities, two main issues emerged:

1. **Which Version of the Old Testament Should Be Used?**
    - Jewish Christians in Israel and surrounding regions tended to use the Hebrew Scriptures.
    - Greek-speaking Christians (which became the majority) primarily used the **Septuagint**, which included the additional deuterocanonical books.
    - This difference led to variations in the accepted Old Testament canon among early Christian communities.
2. **The Jewish Rejection of the Septuagint (Post-AD 70)**
    - After the destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70, Jewish leaders sought to unify Jewish beliefs and practices.
    - Around AD 90, the **Council of Jamnia** (a gathering of Jewish rabbis) rejected the Septuagint and affirmed the Hebrew canon, which did not include the deuterocanonical books.
    - This decision caused further separation between Jews and Christians, as **the Christian Church continued using the Septuagint**, while Jewish communities moved toward the Masoretic Text.

**The Old Testament in the Early Church**

- **The early Church fathers** (e.g., Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen) largely relied on the Septuagint in their teachings.
- **Some books** (e.g., Tobit, Wisdom, Sirach) were read in Christian worship but were later debated regarding their level of inspiration.
- **By the 4th century**, Christian groups began formally recognizing the Old Testament canon, with the Catholic Church affirming the inclusion of the deuterocanonical books and later Protestant reformers rejecting them in favor of the Hebrew canon.

# III. Emergence of the New Testament Canon (1st–2nd Centuries AD)

The **New Testament canon** developed gradually as early Christian communities recognized, preserved, and circulated apostolic writings that were considered divinely inspired. Unlike the Old Testament, which had centuries of tradition behind it, the New Testament was formed during the first few centuries of Christianity in response to the needs of the Church, theological challenges, and competing claims about Jesus and Christian doctrine.

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# 1. Apostolic Writings (1st Century AD)

## The Role of the Apostles in Writing Scripture

The earliest Christian writings originated from the **apostles and their close associates**, who were eyewitnesses of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection. These writings included:

1. **The Gospels** – Accounts of Jesus' life, teachings, and resurrection.
2. **Acts of the Apostles** – A historical record of the early Church.
3. **Epistles (Letters)** – Written by apostles such as Paul, Peter, John, and James to instruct and guide the early Christian communities.
4. **Apocalyptic Literature** – The Book of **Revelation**, attributed to the Apostle John, providing prophecy and encouragement during persecution.

## Early Preservation and Circulation

- These writings were **not initially compiled into a single book** but were written to **specific churches or individuals** and later shared among Christian communities.
- **Paul's letters** (e.g., Romans, Corinthians, Galatians) were among the earliest documents, written between **AD 50–65**.

- The **Gospels** were written between **AD 60–100**, with Matthew, Mark, and Luke (the Synoptic Gospels) appearing earlier, and John being written last.
- The writings were **read aloud in churches** (Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27) and regarded as authoritative alongside the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament).

### Recognition of Key Writings by the End of the 1st Century

By **the late 1st century**, certain texts were widely accepted as authoritative:

- **Paul's Letters** – Regarded as authoritative Scripture within his lifetime (2 Peter 3:15-16 refers to Paul's letters as "Scripture").
- **The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke)** – Used in churches for teaching about Jesus.
- **John's Gospel** – Recognized for its theological depth and apostolic authorship.
- **Other Apostolic Letters** – 1 Peter, 1 John, and possibly Hebrews and James were being circulated.

Although no official canon existed yet, these writings were **functionally authoritative** within Christian communities.

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# 2. Early Lists and Collections (2nd Century AD)

### The Corpus Paulinum – Collection of Paul's Letters

By the late **1st century or early 2nd century**, churches began **collecting Paul's letters** into a single volume called the **Corpus Paulinum**. This collection likely included:

- **Romans**
- **1 & 2 Corinthians**
- **Galatians**
- **Ephesians**
- **Philippians**
- **Colossians**
- **1 & 2 Thessalonians**
- **1 & 2 Timothy**
- **Titus**
- **Philemon**

Paul's letters circulated widely because of his foundational role in establishing churches. Many churches copied and shared these letters, which were seen as **essential Christian doctrine**.

### The Fourfold Gospel Collection

By the **mid-2nd century**, early Christians **recognized four authoritative Gospels**:

1. **Matthew** – Written for Jewish audiences, emphasizing Jesus as the Messiah.
2. **Mark** – The shortest Gospel, likely based on Peter's testimony.
3. **Luke** – Written for a Gentile audience, focusing on Jesus' compassion.
4. **John** – Theologically rich, emphasizing Jesus' divinity.

Early Church Fathers like **Irenaeus (c. 180 AD)** defended the **fourfold Gospel** as divinely ordained, rejecting alternative gospels circulating in some communities.

### Muratorian Fragment (c. 170–180 AD)

The **Muratorian Fragment**, one of the earliest lists of New Testament books, includes:

- The four Gospels
- Acts
- 13 Pauline Epistles
- 1 John, 2 John, Jude
- Revelation
- It **excludes Hebrews, James, and 1 & 2 Peter**, indicating that debates about these books were still ongoing.

By the late **2nd century**, a core collection of New Testament books was widely recognized, even though some books were still disputed.

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# 3. Challenges and Heretical Movements (2nd Century AD)

As Christianity spread, **heresies and alternative teachings** forced the Church to clarify which writings were truly inspired and authoritative.

### A. Gnosticism and Alternative Gospels

- **Gnostic Christians** produced their own writings, often under the names of apostles (e.g., Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Judas).
- These texts contained **mystical or secret knowledge** about Jesus, often contradicting the canonical Gospels.
- The **Church Fathers rejected** these writings as **non-apostolic and unreliable**.

### B. Marcionism (2nd Century AD)

One of the greatest challenges to the canon came from **Marcion of Sinope (c. 144 AD)**.

- Marcion **rejected the Old Testament**, considering the God of Israel different from the Father of Jesus.
- He **created his own "canon"**, which included:
  - An edited version of **Luke's Gospel** (removing Jewish elements).
  - **10 Pauline letters** (excluding the Pastoral Epistles).
  - He **excluded Matthew, Mark, John, Acts, Hebrews, and all General Epistles**.

### The Church's Response to Marcion

- Marcion's views were condemned as heresy.
- His actions **forced the Church to clarify which writings were truly authoritative**.
- In response, **leaders emphasized apostolic authorship** and **unity between the Old and New Testaments**.

### C. The Church's Criteria for Canonization

In response to heresies, the early Church developed **three key criteria** for recognizing Scripture:

1. **Apostolic Origin** – Written by an apostle or a close associate of an apostle (e.g., Mark with Peter, Luke with Paul).
2. **Doctrinal Consistency** – Teachings had to align with apostolic doctrine and the Old Testament.
3. **Widespread Acceptance** – Recognized and used by multiple Christian communities.

By the end of the **2nd century**, the Church had largely **rejected false gospels** and affirmed a set of writings as **authoritative Scripture**.

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# IV. Development Through the 2nd and 3rd Centuries

As the Christian Church continued to grow and spread throughout the Roman Empire, the need to define which writings were divinely inspired became increasingly important. While there was no official canon during this period, key Church Fathers helped shape early Christian theology and confirmed the authoritative status of certain books. This era also saw the development of textual criticism and a growing consensus regarding which books belonged in the New Testament.

## 1. Church Fathers and Their Writings (2nd–3rd Century AD)

During the **2nd and 3rd centuries**, many influential Church Fathers referenced and quoted from certain Christian texts, demonstrating that some writings were already regarded as **authoritative Scripture**. These early Christian leaders played a vital role in shaping the New Testament canon.

**Justin Martyr (c. 100–165 AD)**

- One of the earliest **Christian apologists**, Justin Martyr wrote extensively in defense of Christianity against pagan and Jewish criticisms.
- He **frequently quoted the Gospels and Pauline Epistles**, referring to them as the "memoirs of the apostles."
- His writings indicate that by the mid-2nd century, Christian communities were already using **a defined set of Gospel accounts** in worship and teaching.
- He also referenced the Old Testament **as fulfilled in Christ**, aligning with the Church's belief in continuity between the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Covenant.

**Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130–202 AD)**

- One of the most important **theologians of the 2nd century**, Irenaeus defended orthodoxy against heresies, particularly Gnosticism.
- In his work *Against Heresies* (c. 180 AD), he:
    - **Defended the fourfold Gospel** (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), stating that there could only be **four authoritative Gospels**—not more, not fewer.
    - Quoted extensively from **Paul's letters**, indicating they were widely accepted.
    - Argued against **alternative Gospels** (e.g., Gospel of Thomas), claiming that only apostolic writings carried divine authority.
- His recognition of **four Gospels as uniquely inspired** helped solidify their place in the Christian canon.

**Tertullian (c. 155–220 AD)**

- A Roman theologian from North Africa, Tertullian was the first to use the term **"New Testament"** (*Novum Testamentum*).
- He supported the authority of the four Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters, frequently quoting them in his theological writings.
- He argued against heretical movements like **Marcionism**, which attempted to edit the Christian canon by removing books with Jewish influence.
- Tertullian was instrumental in **shaping Latin Christianity**, and his writings helped reinforce which books were to be considered authoritative.

By the end of the **2nd century**, the writings of these Church Fathers demonstrate that many Christian communities had begun recognizing a core set of New Testament writings, particularly the **four Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters, and some General Epistles**.

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## 2. Origen of Alexandria and the Development of the Canon (3rd Century AD)

One of the most influential biblical scholars of the 3rd century, **Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–253 AD)** made significant contributions to textual criticism and the study of Scripture. His work provided an **early classification** of Christian writings and influenced later canonization decisions.

**Origen's Contribution to the Canon**

- Origen compiled one of the first known **lists of New Testament books**, categorizing them based on their acceptance in Christian churches.
- He distinguished between books that were **universally accepted** (*homologoumena*) and those that were **disputed** (*antilegomena*).

**Books Universally Accepted (Homologoumena)**

Origen noted that the following books were widely accepted by the Church:

- **Four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John)**
- **Acts of the Apostles**
- **Paul's 13 Epistles** (Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, etc.)
- **1 Peter**
- **1 John**

These books were regularly read in Christian assemblies and quoted as **authoritative Scripture**.

**Books Disputed but Still Read in Churches (Antilegomena)**

Some books were still debated by Christian communities but remained in use:

- **Hebrews** – Its authorship was uncertain (Paul? Barnabas? Apollos?), but its theology was consistent with Christian doctrine.
- **James** – Some questioned whether it aligned fully with Paul's teachings on faith and works.
- **2 Peter** – Its stylistic differences from 1 Peter led to some doubts.
- **2 & 3 John** – Their brevity and lack of widespread circulation raised concerns.
- **Jude** – Its reference to non-canonical texts (e.g., Book of Enoch) made some hesitant to accept it.

- **Revelation** – Accepted by some churches, but others were cautious due to its **apocalyptic imagery** and connection to certain heretical groups (e.g., Montanists).

**Books Rejected as Non-Canonical**

Origen **explicitly rejected** certain writings that some heretical groups promoted:

- **Gospel of Thomas**
- **Gospel of Peter**
- **Gospel of Mary**
- **Acts of Paul**

These writings were considered **inauthentic and untrustworthy** because they lacked apostolic authority or contained theological errors.

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### 3. The Role of Origen's Work in Later Canonization

Origen's distinction between universally accepted books and disputed ones **laid the foundation for later canon discussions**. His work influenced subsequent theologians and councils that formalized the New Testament canon in the 4th century.

1. **He emphasized apostolic authority** – Only books written by apostles or their close associates were considered authoritative.
2. **He reinforced the fourfold Gospel tradition** – Supporting Irenaeus' claim that only Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were divinely inspired.
3. **He acknowledged debates** – His honesty about disputed books demonstrated that the Church was still in the process of **discerning the canon**, rather than arbitrarily selecting books.
4. **He engaged in textual criticism** – Origen's *Hexapla* (a six-column comparison of Old Testament texts) showcased his scholarly approach to preserving biblical accuracy.

While Origen's list was not final, it reflected a **growing consensus** among Christian communities regarding which writings were truly inspired.

# VI. Eastern and Western Churches: Diverging and Converging

As the New Testament canon became widely recognized by the late **4th century**, both the **Eastern (Greek-speaking) and Western (Latin-speaking) Christian traditions** largely accepted the **27-book New Testament** that we know today. However, the acceptance of certain

Old Testament texts and the theological emphasis on the canon differed between the two branches of Christianity. While both East and West shared a core set of Scriptures, variations in **language, tradition, and ecclesiastical authority** led to some differences in **the Old Testament canon and biblical interpretation**.

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## 1. Eastern Church Acceptance

The **Eastern Orthodox Church**, which emerged from the Greek-speaking world, largely accepted the **same 27 books of the New Testament**, but **Old Testament canon differences persisted** due to historical and liturgical traditions.

**New Testament Canon in the East**

- **By the 4th century, Eastern churches had largely affirmed the 27-book canon**, though some debate continued over books such as Hebrews, 2 Peter, Jude, and Revelation.
- **Revelation was the most contested book in the East**, with some Church Fathers (e.g., **Cyril of Jerusalem** and **John Chrysostom**) questioning its apostolic origin and theological content.
- While Revelation was ultimately accepted, **it is still not read in the liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church today**.

**Old Testament Canon Differences**

- The **Eastern Church inherited the Septuagint** (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) as its primary Old Testament, leading to **a broader canon than the Western Church**.
- Some Eastern Orthodox traditions recognize additional deuterocanonical books, such as:
  - **1 & 2 Esdras**
  - **Prayer of Manasseh**
  - **Psalm 151**
  - **3 & 4 Maccabees**
- Unlike the West, where the canon was more definitively declared by **Church councils**, the East relied on **local councils and the authority of influential bishops** rather than a single, binding decision.

**Church Fathers and the Canon in the East**

- **Athanasius of Alexandria (367 AD)** provided an early affirmation of the 27-book New Testament canon, but his Old Testament list reflected the Septuagint.

- **Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 350 AD)** was cautious about accepting books like Revelation, reflecting broader Eastern hesitation toward apocalyptic literature.
- **John Chrysostom (c. 347–407 AD)** referenced the four Gospels, Acts, and Pauline epistles as Scripture but was less definitive about Revelation.

The **fluidity of the Old Testament canon** in Eastern Christianity resulted in **slight variations across different Orthodox traditions**, but the **New Testament canon was firmly established**.

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## 2. Western Church Acceptance

In the **Latin West**, the process of recognizing the biblical canon was more structured, largely due to the **councils of Hippo (393 AD) and Carthage (397, 419 AD)**, which confirmed the **27-book New Testament** and a **broader Old Testament canon** similar to the Septuagint.

**New Testament Canon in the West**

- The **Latin-speaking Church quickly adopted the 27-book canon** after its affirmation by the regional councils.
- **By the 5th century, the canon was effectively fixed**, with little debate over New Testament books.

**The Role of Jerome and the Latin Vulgate**

- In the late **4th century**, **Pope Damasus I (r. 366–384 AD)** commissioned **Jerome (c. 347–420 AD)** to translate the Bible into **Latin**.
- Jerome's translation, known as the **Vulgate**, became the **official Bible of the Western Church** for over 1,000 years.
- However, **Jerome distinguished between "proto-canonical" books (universally accepted Old Testament texts) and "deuterocanonical" books (those found in the Septuagint but not in the Hebrew Bible)**.
    - He initially preferred the **Hebrew Old Testament canon** but ultimately **included the deuterocanonical books in the Vulgate** under pressure from Church authorities.
    - His distinction between canonical and deuterocanonical books **influenced later debates during the Protestant Reformation**.

**Papal Authority and the Canon**

- Unlike the **Eastern Church**, which relied more on local councils and theological tradition, the **Western Church had a more centralized structure under the authority of the Bishop of Rome (the Pope)**.

- **Pope Innocent I (405 AD)** issued a decree listing the **same 27 New Testament books** and affirming the broader Old Testament canon.
- This papal endorsement helped solidify the canon in the Latin Church.

**Standardization and Influence in the West**

- The **Latin West moved toward standardization more quickly than the Greek East**, due to:
    - The widespread use of **the Latin Vulgate**.
    - **The centralized role of the Papacy** in decision-making.
    - The influence of **Augustine (354–430 AD), who strongly supported the inclusion of the deuterocanonical books**.

Thus, by the early **5th century**, the **Western Church had firmly established the 27-book New Testament** and an **Old Testament that included the deuterocanonical books**, aligning with the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew canon.

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## 3. Key Differences Between East and West

By the **5th century**, both **Eastern Orthodox and Western (Catholic) Christianity** had settled on the **same New Testament canon**, but their approaches to the Old Testament varied.

| Category | Eastern Church (Greek) | Western Church (Latin) |
|---|---|---|
| **New Testament** | 27 books, but some hesitancy toward **Revelation** | 27 books, firmly established by Hippo & Carthage |
| **Old Testament** | Based on the **Septuagint**, with additional books in some traditions (e.g., 3 & 4 Maccabees, Psalm 151) | Included the **deuterocanonical books**, affirmed by councils |
| **Authority in Canonization** | Local councils, Church Fathers (e.g., Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem) | Regional councils (Hippo, Carthage), papal influence (Innocent I) |
| **Liturgical Use** | Revelation is **not** read in Orthodox liturgy | Revelation is included in Catholic liturgy |
| **Bible Translation** | Greek **Septuagint** | Latin **Vulgate** (translated by Jerome) |

Despite these differences, both traditions **recognized the same core canon for the New Testament**, which remains unchanged across Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions today.

# VII. The Middle Ages and the Reformation

The **Middle Ages (5th–15th centuries)** saw little debate over the **New Testament canon**, which remained stable across both the Eastern and Western Churches. However, discussions about the **Old Testament canon continued**, particularly regarding the **Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical books**. The **Protestant Reformation (16th century)** reignited these debates, leading to a formal **reaffirmation of the canon by the Catholic Church at the Council of Trent (1545–1563)** and a distinct separation between Catholic and Protestant views on the Old Testament.

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## 1. The Medieval Period (5th–15th Centuries)

By the **early medieval period**, the **27-book New Testament canon was widely accepted** throughout both the Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Catholic) Churches. However, **Old Testament canon debates** persisted, especially concerning books that were included in the **Septuagint but not in the Hebrew Masoretic Text**.

### A. Stability of the New Testament Canon

- The **Latin-speaking Catholic West** and the **Greek-speaking Orthodox East continued to use the 27 books** of the New Testament without major disputes.
- Biblical manuscripts such as the **Codex Vaticanus, Codex Sinaiticus, and Codex Alexandrinus** (4th–5th centuries) confirmed the wide circulation of the **established New Testament canon**.
- Theologians like **Augustine (354–430 AD) and Gregory the Great (540–604 AD)** affirmed the **27-book New Testament canon** as divinely inspired.

### B. Old Testament Canon Debates

While the **New Testament was fixed**, the **Old Testament canon remained a point of discussion**, particularly regarding the **Deuterocanonical books (or Apocrypha)**:

- Books such as **Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Baruch, and 1–2 Maccabees** were **included in the Latin Vulgate Bible**, following the tradition of the **Septuagint**.
- However, some scholars, following **Jerome's earlier distinction**, considered these books **less authoritative** than the Hebrew Old Testament books.

### C. Influence of the Latin Vulgate

- Jerome's **Vulgate (completed c. 405 AD)** became the **official Bible of the Western Church** throughout the medieval period.
- Although Jerome was hesitant about the deuterocanonical books, he included them because the Church accepted the **Septuagint's wider Old Testament canon**.
- The **Catholic Church continued to read and use these books in worship and theology**, though some scholars questioned their full inspiration.

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## 2. The Protestant Reformation (16th Century)

The **Protestant Reformation (1517–1648)** fundamentally reshaped discussions on the biblical canon, particularly regarding the **Old Testament**. While Reformers **retained the same 27-book New Testament**, they **rejected the deuterocanonical books**, aligning instead with the **Hebrew Old Testament canon**.

### A. Martin Luther's Challenge to the Old Testament Canon

- **Martin Luther (1483–1546)** was one of the first Reformers to challenge the traditional Old Testament canon.
- He **rejected the deuterocanonical books**, arguing that they were **not inspired at the same level** as the Hebrew Scriptures.
- **Luther's 1534 German Bible** included these books in a separate section labeled **"Apocrypha"**, stating that while they were **useful for reading**, they should not be used to establish doctrine.
- His reasoning echoed **Jerome's earlier concerns** that the Hebrew canon should take precedence over the Greek Septuagint.

### B. Other Protestant Reformers

- **John Calvin (1509–1564)** and **Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531)** also rejected the deuterocanonical books, affirming only the **39 books of the Hebrew Old Testament**.
- **The Anglican Church (Church of England)**, influenced by both Catholic and Protestant traditions, **retained the Apocrypha in its Bible but treated them as secondary texts**.
- The **Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)**, a foundational Protestant document, declared that the **Apocrypha had no divine authority**.

### C. The Impact on Protestant Bibles

- Protestant Bible translations, such as the **Geneva Bible (1560) and the King James Version (1611)**, initially **included the Apocrypha in a separate section**.
- However, **by the 19th century**, most Protestant Bibles had **completely removed the Apocrypha**.

- Today, most **Protestant traditions** follow the **39-book Hebrew Old Testament canon**, whereas **Catholic and Orthodox churches** retain the **broader Old Testament canon based on the Septuagint**.

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### 3. The Council of Trent (1545–1563): The Catholic Response

In response to the challenges of the Protestant Reformation, the **Catholic Church convened the Council of Trent (1545–1563)** to clarify key doctrines, including the **biblical canon**.

**A. Formal Declaration of the Canon**

- On **April 8, 1546**, the **Council of Trent officially declared the Catholic canon**, reaffirming:
  - The **27 books of the New Testament** (unchallenged).
  - The **46 books of the Old Testament**, **including the deuterocanonical books**.
  - The rejection of **Protestant claims that the Apocrypha were non-canonical**.

**B. The Deuterocanonical Books Are Affirmed**

- The council **explicitly condemned Protestant teachings that rejected the deuterocanonical books**.
- The Church asserted that these books **had always been part of Christian Scripture** and were **fully inspired and authoritative**.

**C. The Vulgate Becomes the Official Bible**

- The **Latin Vulgate**, Jerome's translation, was declared the **official and authoritative Bible of the Catholic Church**.
- This decision solidified the **Catholic Old Testament canon**, which includes the deuterocanonical books, as **unchangeable**.

**D. Lasting Impact on Catholic and Protestant Bibles**

- The **Council of Trent's decree remains the Catholic Church's official stance** on the canon to this day.
- The Protestant rejection of the deuterocanonical books led to the **clear division between Catholic and Protestant Bibles**.
- While **Orthodox Christianity continues to follow the broader Septuagint canon**, Catholic and Protestant churches **remain divided over the Old Testament**.

# VIII. Conclusion

## 1. Settled but Not Uniform

By the **late 4th century**, the **New Testament canon was broadly settled**, with **27 books universally accepted** across Christian traditions. While some early debates persisted over books such as **Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, and Revelation**, by the time of **Athanasius' 39th Festal Letter (AD 367)** and the **Councils of Hippo (393 AD) and Carthage (397, 419 AD)**, there was widespread agreement on the **New Testament Scriptures**.

The **Old Testament canon, however, remained more fluid** and developed differently in various Christian traditions:

- **Jewish communities** solidified their **Hebrew Bible (Tanakh)**, rejecting the **Septuagint's deuterocanonical books** in the late 1st century (Council of Jamnia, c. 90 AD).
- **Catholic and Orthodox traditions** continued using the **Greek Septuagint**, which included additional books like **Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, and 1–2 Maccabees**.
- **Protestant Reformers (16th century)** rejected these deuterocanonical books, aligning with the **Jewish Hebrew Bible** for their Old Testament.
- **Eastern Orthodox churches** accepted even more texts, such as **3 & 4 Maccabees and Psalm 151**, reflecting regional variations in the canon.

Thus, while **the New Testament canon remained consistent**, differences in **the Old Testament canon** resulted in **divergent biblical traditions** that persist today.

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## 2. Continuing Reverence & Study

Despite **variations in the Old Testament**, the **core writings of both the Old and New Testaments** have remained central to **Christian faith, doctrine, and worship** for centuries.

- **The Bible remains the most influential and widely read book in history.**
- **Biblical manuscripts, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls (discovered in 1947), continue to provide insight into the transmission and preservation of Scripture.**
- **Ongoing scholarly work in textual criticism helps refine translations, ensuring accuracy in biblical texts.**

The process of canonization was **not about creating Scripture** but **recognizing which writings were divinely inspired and had been consistently used in Christian worship and teaching**. Church leaders, theologians, and scholars continue to explore the **historical, linguistic, and theological dimensions of the canon**, deepening our understanding of its development.

## 3. Key Takeaway

The **canonization of the Bible was an organic process**, unfolding over **several centuries** through a combination of:

- **Apostolic authority** – Writings linked to Jesus' apostles carried special weight.
- **Usage in worship** – Texts regularly read and used in Christian communities were more likely to be recognized as Scripture.
- **Theological debates** – Responses to heresies (e.g., Gnosticism, Marcionism) clarified which writings upheld true doctrine.
- **Consensus-building** – Key **Church Fathers and councils** played essential roles in affirming the canon.

The Bible we have today is the result of **divine inspiration**, **faithful preservation**, and **centuries of careful discernment** by the Church. While **differences in the Old Testament canon** remain among Christian traditions, the **New Testament canon has been universally accepted for over 1,600 years**. This enduring unity highlights the profound and lasting impact of the biblical canon on **Christian faith, theology, and history**.